Cementocracy

Hirslund, Dan Vesalainen; Phyak, Prem

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Cementocracy

Development as a political good has resulted in an alliance between business leaders and the political establishment

- DAN HIRSLUND (/author/dan+hirslund), Prem Phyak (/author/prem+phyak)

Dec 18, 2017-Bikas' (development) has resurfaced as a key idea in the present political discourse of Nepal, supplanting the post-conflict trope of a 'naya Nepal' which has now allegedly arrived.

Across ideological party divides, the rhetoric of development has taken centre stage in the recent local, provincial and parliamentary elections. While some leaders have presented themselves as 'bikase netas' (pro-development leaders), others have promised that they will construct and upgrade the condition of roads, and build taps.

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All major political parties included in their election speeches the development of mega hydropower projects, the building of 'smart cities' and 'modernisation' of the country as central political agendas for wooing voters. At the local level, political leaders have promised to build bridges, expand roads into agricultural areas, open factories, and even erect viewing towers.

Nepal has certainly become 'open for business', but it is a business which is focused particularly on erecting concrete-based infrastructure. This vision suggests that the old European project of modernity has now returned as a major political vision that "cements" all parties and citizens through the "cementing" of the nation.

In other words, the discourse of development has (once again) become hegemonic as both political leaders and the general public unquestionably embrace it as a solution to people's daily hardships. Here, we suggest that this ascendancy of development as an unquestionable political good has opened up for a new alliance between business leaders and the political establishment with challenging effects for wider socioeconomic improvements as well as for inclusive democratic politics.

Politics of infrastructural development

The idea of development as an infrastructural project geared towards emulating western modernisation has a long history in Nepal and can be traced back to at least the early 1950s when USAID began its operations in the country.

The North American anthropologist Stacey Lee Pigg has famously traced the notion's institutionalisation as a buzz word in Nepali public culture, showing how it works ideologically to create an imagined national community united around the quantifiable internal differentiation of 'bikas'.

Some places have more, some have less, and some have none of this aspirational quality but none escape its discursive effects. This has created, and continues to create, profoundly disjunctive relations between regions that are differentially integrated into the development jargon, as the power to wield development is unequally distributed.

But this critique of development belongs to a different period, one that straddled the experience of Panchayat and liberal democratic culture in Nepal, and where the project of development was chiefly concerned with social 'upliftment' through the expansion of healthcare, education and similar social services.

This vision of development, borne from the global rise of US cultural hegemony following its ascendancy after World War II, was a profoundly ideological project aimed at eradicating human misery through a wide approach to social change.

Today, very little is left of these grand visions, if not discursively, then at least in practice. Since the fall of the Communist Bloc, US-style liberalism has managed to convince national elites worldwide that social 'backwardness' is best left to market justice to address, thus rendering large-scale social investment either obsolete, foolhardy or illegitimate.

Meanwhile, the rise of a multi-polar global order has spawned new competitions over the control of markets, which in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Nepal, in particular, has meant the rapid coalescing of forces around the building of infrastructure.

Multiple agendas are combining to advance this new(er) avatar of the development industry: nationally, these include at least modernisation-era dreams of full industrialisation (witness the proclamation of seven national Special Economic Zones, one in each province) but also the realisation that stemming the outflow of much needed labourers for the national economy will not be realistic without much better integration of rural areas into metropolitan services.

Internationally, the policies of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Asian Development Bank, together with more limited investments by India based on its long-term resource interest in Himalayan water flows, has turned good parts of Nepal into zones of infrastructural competition all condensed in this single, seemingly benevolent idea of development.

There now seem to be few areas of investment left in Nepal which would not benefit from a good amount of cementing from one or the other of these many overlapping agendas of 'development'. Needless to say, such a dominant vision of change, particularly as it departs from the transformation of the non-human environment, risks being blind to humans, and therefore wider socioeconomic, issues.

Contract politics

With the consolidation of infrastructural development as a hegemonic trope, something else is happening as well, which has potentially wide ramifications for the trajectory of the country's political transformation. Business leaders, particularly from the construction sector, are increasingly contesting elections.

Unlike the previous class of business leaders who eschewed the jungle of politicking, this new class has chosen the opposite strategy and actively endorsed the power games necessary for participating in institutionalised politics.


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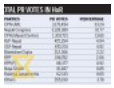
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On one hand, as vigorously reported by the media, this new relationship is about the exchange of money for power. Through the injection of money into campaigning, business-class politicians are making politics more expensive, essentially 'buying' it in exchange for a permanent formal seat in policy-making processes.

In one sense, one could think of this as the logical future of prevalent lobbying, thus through a circumscribed logic actually enhancing 'transparency' between economic and political power by uniting it. More ominously, it legitimises a corporate logic through which businesses consider their involvement in politics an investment from which they expect a return.

This new alliancing draws from the larger consolidation of political visions around exactly the kind of work that private businesses are undertaking. With the 'common good' having been reduced to building, builders need little additional political acumen to turn their business plans into political slogans, as they can directly be read as such.

The discursive underpinning of this happy congruence was amply evident during the recent campaign period with electives basically drawing up smaller and larger construction projects to appease (and invite) voters.

Yet, as candidates made agreements with local communities about the number of water taps, irrigation canals, bridges, roads, schools and hospitals they will provide, the entire representative system evolved into a contract-form of politics whereby voters essentially 'purchased' guarantees for infrastructural outcomes with the currency of their thumbs.

While this form of representational politics is hardly unique to Nepal, it does attain another dimension when the persons engaging in this form of democratic bargaining actually operate businesses based on the same kind of contract-logic that require an intimate understanding of profitability.

It is this 'natural' extension of business acumen into political contracting that helps account for the ease with which corporate houses have entered the new 'market' of politics.

Who wins and who loses?

There is today a rising acceptance of the entry of business elites into political leadership based on the idea that since their economic interests are also in the interest of national development, the opposite should also be true: i.e., that the political community is best served by successful business people.

The popularity of contract politics helps link these two otherwise very different registers of leadership based on private vs. public interests. Cementocracy heralds the peculiar combination of transformations to the tradition of representative democracy--whereby business elites are understood to represent people's aspirations through the culling of their business interests--together with the birth of a particular concept of development which is centred on the construction industry.

If cement is to be the foundation of Nepal's development fantasies, then what would be more natural than installing proprietors of the construction industry as national leaders? The slogan of "cementing the nation" (to borrow from Bishwakarma Cement) is hardly new. But the alliance between politics and construction through a circumscribed notion of infrastructural development is looking to become one of the more substantial subterranean changes to the country's political culture that risk going unnoticed under the celebration of republican constitutionalism.

This situation indicates that as the politics of development becomes a uniting force, contractors and their knowledge gain currency in shaping Nepal's political future. Yet, this contract politics not only misrecognises local sociopolitical and economic complexities and inequalities but also weakens the power of people's mandates through their votes.

- Hirslund is a post-doc scholar at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Denmark, Phyak is an assistant professor at the Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

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